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# FLAUNTING IT ON FACEBOOK: YOUNG ADULTS, DRINKING CULTURES AND THE CULT OF CELEBRITY

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The background of the page is a photograph of several petri dishes containing bacterial cultures. The dishes are arranged on a dark surface, and the scene is illuminated with a strong blue light, which is typical for viewing certain types of bacterial growth. The cultures appear as white, fuzzy patches on the agar medium.

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# SUMMARY

Young adults in Aotearoa/New Zealand (NZ) regularly engage in heavy drinking episodes with groups of friends within a collective culture of intoxication to 'have fun' and 'be sociable'. This population has also rapidly increased their use of new social networking technologies (e.g. mobile camera/video phones; Facebook and YouTube) and are said to be obsessed with identity, image and celebrity. This research project explored the ways in which new technologies are being used by a range of young people (and others, including marketers) in drinking practices and drinking cultures in Aotearoa/NZ. It also explored how these technologies impact on young adults' behaviours and identities, and how this varies across young adults of diverse ethnicities (Māori [indigenous people of NZ], Pasifika [people descended from the Pacific Islands] and Pākehā [people of European descent]), social classes and genders.

We collected data from a large and diverse sample of young adults aged 18-25 years employing novel and innovative methodologies across three data collection stages. In total 141 participants took part in 34 friendship focus group discussions (12 Pākehā, 12 Māori and 10 Pasifika groups) while 23 young adults showed and discussed their Facebook pages during an individual interview that involved screen-capture software and video recordings. Popular online material regarding drinking alcohol was also collected (via groups, interviews, and web searches), providing a database of 487 links to relevant material (including websites, apps, and games). Critical and in-depth qualitative analyses across these multimodal datasets were undertaken.

Key findings demonstrated that social technologies play a crucial role in young adults' drinking cultures and processes of identity construction. Consuming alcohol to a point of intoxication was a commonplace leisure-time activity for most of the young adult participants, and social network technologies were fully integrated into their drinking cultures. Facebook was employed by all participants and was used before, during and following drinking episodes. Uploading and sharing photos on Facebook was particularly central to young people's drinking cultures and the ongoing creation of their identities. This involved a great deal of Facebook 'work' to ensure appropriate identity displays such as tagging (the addition of explanatory or identifying labels) and untagging photos.

Being visible online was crucial for many young adults, and they put significant amounts of time and energy into updating and maintaining Facebook pages, particularly with material regarding drinking practices and events. However this was not consistent across the sample, and our findings revealed nuanced and complex ways in which people from different ethnicities, genders and social classes engaged with drinking cultures and new technologies in different ways, reflecting their positioning within the social structure. Pākehā shared their drinking practices online with relatively little reflection, while Pasifika and Māori participants were more likely to discuss avoiding online displays of drinking and demonstrated greater reflexive self-surveillance. Females spoke of being more aware of normative expectations around gender than males, and described particular forms of online identity displays (e.g. moderated intake, controlled self-determination). Participants from upper socio-economic groups expressed less concern than others about both drinking and posting material online. Celebrity culture

was actively engaged with, in part at least, as a means of expressing what it is to be a young adult in contemporary society, and reinforcing the need for young people to engage in their own everyday practices of 'celebritising' themselves through drinking cultures online.

Alcohol companies employed social media to market their products to young people in sophisticated ways that meant the campaigns and actions were rarely perceived as marketing. Online alcohol marketing initiatives were actively appropriated by young people and reproduced within their Facebook pages to present tastes and preferences, facilitate social interaction, construct identities, and more generally develop cultural capital. These commercial activities within the commercial platforms that constitute social networking systems contribute heavily to a general 'culture of intoxication' while simultaneously allowing young people to 'create' and 'produce' themselves online via the sharing of consumption 'choices', online interactions and activities.

# BACKGROUND

This project is situated at the intersection of three major contemporary social concerns: young adults' normalised culture of heavy drinking; their high uptake and use of new social networking technologies; and the construction of young adults' identities within current neoliberal society. Knowledge and theorising in these three areas was drawn on and integrated to systematically investigate contemporary drinking cultures across ethnicities, genders, and social classes in Aotearoa/NZ.

First, many young people are involved in normalised practices around heavy drinking, which they view as pleasurable, involving having fun and being sociable (Lyons & Willott, 2008; McCreanor, Moewaka Barnes, Gregory, Borell & Kaiwai, 2008; Szmigin et al., 2008). Researchers have documented factors which have contributed to this development (Measham & Brain, 2005), including the commodification of pleasure (Measham, 2004) into commercialised packages that have been termed 'cultures of intoxication' (Measham, 2006) and 'intoxigenic environments' (McCreanor, Moewaka Barnes et al., 2008). Stories about drinking are told and retold amongst friends, playing a crucial role in identity construction (Giles, 1999; Griffin et al., 2009; McCreanor, Moewaka Barnes, Gregory, Kaiwai & Borell, 2005; McCreanor, Greenaway, Moewaka Barnes, Borell, & Gregory, 2005) and maintaining friendships (Sheehan & Ridge, 2001). Increasingly drinking stories are shared online, often using digital images (Skinstad, 2008). In Aotearoa/NZ specific alcoholic beverages are consumed to signal taste and identity (Lyons & Willott, 2008; McCreanor, Greenaway, et al., 2005; McCreanor, Moewaka Barnes, et al., 2005) and drinking patterns vary across ethnicity, class and gender (Ministry of Health, 2007; McEwan, Campbell, Lyons & Swain 2013; Wells, Baxter, & Schaaf, 2007). While much research has investigated youth drinking *behaviours*, relatively little academic attention has focused on drinking *cultures*, which are located within an increasingly technologically mediated world (McCreanor et al., 2013; Murthy, 2008) saturated with media images of youthful drunken excess, including 'drunken celebs'. Young NZ adults see heavy drinking as part of a national identity (Braun, 2008; Lyons & Willott, 2008; McCreanor, Moewaka Barnes et al., 2005; McEwan et al., 2013). The embeddedness of drinking cultures in daily relationships (Niland, Lyons, Goodwin & Hutton, 2013), identity negotiations and new technologies has not yet received any sustained analytic attention.



Second, young adults have also rapidly increased their uptake and use of new social networking technologies (e.g., mobile phones and social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube) (Williams, 2008). Facebook now has over a billion users (Facebook, 2014). Several key features distinguish SNS: 1) they blur or remove boundaries between public/private spaces (Papacharissi, 2009); private identity/public spaces (Papacharissi, 2009), persona and user/consumer (Hearn, 2008); 2) they are often seen as online extensions of face-to-face relationships (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Williams, 2008); 3) they are 'sticky'; that is, users visit them frequently (Hearn, 2008; Rosen, 2006); and 4) graphic images (photographs, video) are significant (Williams, 2008) and continuously rejuvenated (Papacharissi, 2009), functioning to visually privilege social connections and offline socialising (Livingstone, 2008). Research demonstrates that young people "are living life online and in public via these sites" (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008, p. 417) and they are integral to identity, relationships and lifestyles (boyd, 2007; Livingstone, 2008). The multibillion dollar acquisitions of networking sites by global media interests, and the initial public offering of Facebook as the biggest in Internet history, highlight how social networking online is increasingly owned and controlled by corporate commercial interests. Innovative ways of turning user-bases into a 'product', that is a highly valuable commodity to be sold to third parties (like alcohol corporations), follows closely on the popular uptake of social networking services. Recent research demonstrates high levels of alcohol-related content on SNS (Beullens & Schepers, 2013; Egan & Moreno, 2011) that has been linked to a desire to display a highly valued 'heavy drinking' identity (Griffiths & Casswell, 2010; Ridout, Campbell & Ellis, 2012). Drinking and intoxication content on Facebook, MySpace and YouTube is seen as positive and funny by young people who share it widely (Morgan, Snelson & Elison-Bowers, 2010). Such content normalises a culture of intoxication (Griffiths & Casswell, 2010; McCreanor et al., 2013). Research efforts have not kept up with the use of such technologies as normal parts of young adults' routine social lives.

Third, critical social theory has argued that discourses of individual freedom, self-expression and authenticity demand that we live our lives as if this was part of a biographical project of self-realisation in a society in which we all appear to have 'free' choice to become whoever we want to be and to consume whatever we want (Giddens, 1991; Rose, 1999). This is manifest in a globalised culture of celebrity, self-commodification and excess which has particular resonances for young people (Duits & van Romondt Vis, 2009). The obsession with identity, image and celebrity (Hopkins, 2002) as well as constant innovation and change (Hearn, 2008) requires that the reflexive project of the self (Giddens, 1991) involves continual (re)creation and maintenance, an ongoing cycle of self-invention. Such highly stylised self construction can be seen across several commercially mediated cultural forms (including SNS platforms) where individuals celebrate and celebritise the self, and in doing so, construct their identities (Hearn, 2008). This project of endlessly (re) crafting and performing an 'authentic' self is contradictory, particularly in a neoliberal social order in which people are supposed to have a stable, resilient core identity (Walkerdine, 2003). Nevertheless these developments have been enthusiastically endorsed and catalysed by the discipline and practice of marketing. Marketing encourages subjects to actively engage with branded products and services in developing and shaping their sense of selfhood. Furthermore, however, campaigns have moved beyond mere niche targeting to developing relationships with individuals tailored to their co-created needs (McCreanor, Moewaka Barnes et al., 2005; Venkatesh, 1999; Viser, 1999). At its apex this logic places identity at the very core of the marketing and branding process, which in turn contributes to the normalisation of a broader culture of self-promotion. Thus it has become possible to speak of the self-as-brand, or the performance of one's own 'celebrity brand', as a key part of 'successful' self-creation throughout the life course (Hearn, 2008).

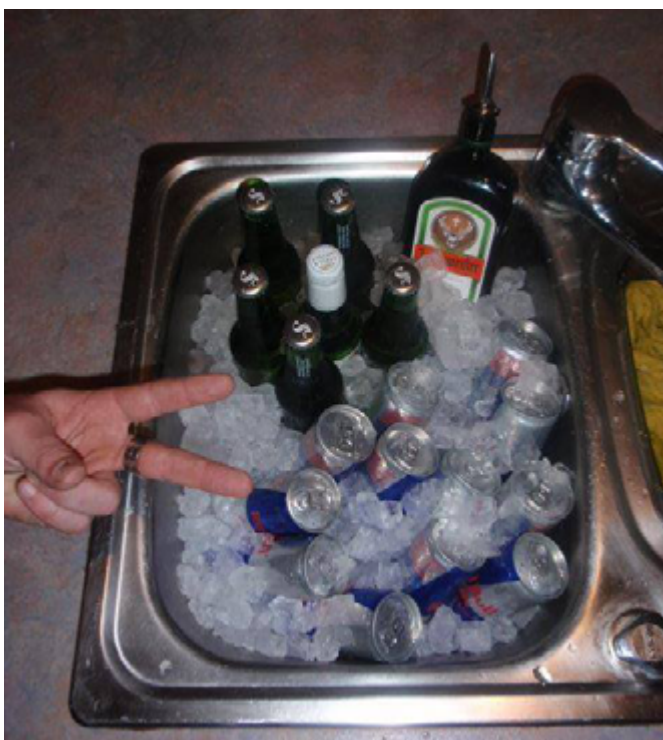
Relatively little systematic empirical research has investigated the ways in which 'neo-liberalism' impacts on people's everyday lives, and how everyday life is negotiated, reproduced and transformed. New media technologies are becoming thoroughly embedded in the routines of young people's lives (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Ministry of Health, 2007), and enable individuals to 'celebritise the self' by sharing information on the Internet about their experiences, often about their drinking cultures. These reflect widespread media accounts of drunken celebrities, reinforcing social norms around gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class (Hesmondhalgh, 2005; Skeggs, 2005). Commerce is quick to lead here, participating by providing a vast array of magazines, newspapers, movies, websites, promotions, competitions and other materials that resource, articulate and amplify these trends. Our research sought to empirically investigate these issues to provide understandings and knowledge regarding identity negotiation, drinking practices and drinking cultures among young adults in Aotearoa/NZ from a diversity of backgrounds.



# AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This research aimed to provide in-depth understandings of young adults' drinking cultures and the roles that new media technologies and the current fascination with celebrity play in these cultures. To achieve these overall goals, a number of specific objectives were developed, as follows:

1. Identify how social network technologies are implicated in young people's drinking cultures.
2. Explore how versions of identity are being created, negotiated, and performed through drinking practices, for example via the circulation of drinking stories and public displays on SNS.
3. Gain insight into the role SNS and digital photographs play in drinking cultures and identify the ways in which images relating to drinking stories are produced and displayed for others to view.
4. Develop understandings of the ways in which identity negotiations and performances vary across ethnicity, gender, and social class.
5. Gain insight into the extent of young adults' use of new technologies to produce their own version of 'everyday celebrity' and how this relates to their drinking practices and cultures.
6. Develop new theoretical understandings of the processes of identity construction and negotiation through drinking cultures and new media technologies.
7. Extend current theoretical frameworks on subjectivity and self-creation and their centrality to the dominant neoliberal culture where fame and attention are significantly valued.



# METHODS

To achieve the research objectives, we employed a three-stage data collection process which included face-to-face and Internet-based methods in combination with multiple analytic methods including thematic and discursive analysis, media studies approaches, kaupapa Māori methods, website analyses and multimodal discourse analysis.

## Stage 1: Friendship group discussions

In total, 141 participants took part in 34 friendship focus group discussions about socializing, drinking practices, drinking cultures and social networking. Twelve of the groups consisted of predominantly Pākehā participants, 12 consisted of predominantly Māori participants, and 10 included predominantly Pasifika participants. These groups were facilitated by the three PhD students on the research team, namely Patricia Niland (Pākehā participants), Acushla Dee O'Carroll (Māori participants) and Lina Samu (Pasifika participants) each of whom worked with groups of their own ethnicity.

Group discussions, which lasted from 1-2 hours, were videotaped and transcribed verbatim by the PhD students. Participant ages ranged from 18-25 years with a mean age of 20.2 years (SD = 2.1). There were 80 female participants (56.7%), 57 male participants (40.4%), and 4 Fa'afafine/Fakaleiti/Aka Vaine<sup>1</sup> (2.8%). The groups included 9 with all female participants, 6 with all male participants, and 19 with both males and females. The groups were also diverse in terms of location, undertaken in a range of settings, including large cities and smaller provincial towns throughout Aotearoa/NZ. Groups ranged in the socioeconomic status of their participants (from poor working class through to very wealthy), as well as occupations (including employed and unemployed young people, single parents, and students).

## Stage 2: Individual interviews

Some of the friendship group participants from stage one were subsequently invited to take part in a one-on-one interview with the same researcher who had facilitated their discussion group. In total, 18 of these participants took part in individual interviews, and 5 new participants were also interviewed. Interviews were again led by the 3 PhD student researchers: 7 interviews were conducted with young Pākehā adults; 8 with young Māori adults; 8 with young Pasifika adults. There were 15 females, 7 males, and 1 Fa'afafine participants interviewed. Their ages ranged from 18-25 (M = 21 yrs; SD = 2.4). The interviews were run with a laptop computer alongside the participant, and participants were asked to show and talk about their Facebook pages, their photos, any material related to their drinking practices or alcohol, and also discuss the ways in which they used social networking and engaged in online environments. The interviews were videotaped and screen capture software was used to provide a digital record of all activity on the laptop screen. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the PhD researchers and Transana software was employed to collate 3 strands of data: video recording, transcript, and screen recording (providing a 'multimodal' dataset). This qualitative software programme facilitates "the transcription, analysis and management of digital video or audio data" (Mavrikis & Geraniou, 2011, p.246). These strands were time-synchronised and enabled the researchers to view what was

<sup>1</sup> These terms are used in Pasifika cultures for people born male but whose spirit is female

being said (transcript), alongside hearing the talk (audio) and watching both the participant (visual) and the screen activity record simultaneously.

### Stage 3: Website and online material

The data collected in stages 1 and 2 of the project was replete with examples of favoured websites and online activity that young adults engaged with regularly. The investigators and research assistants also regularly shared relevant online material they had encountered with the team via an email list. This ongoing information regarding websites and online material was collated into a database (with links and screen captures) that was kept up-to-date throughout the project. The final database includes 487 entries (275 from the friendship groups, 131 from the interviews, and 81 from the email list archive). Facebook was the most frequently mentioned website by both group and individual interview participants (64% and 63% respectively), followed by other SNS (12% and 13% respectively).

### Data management and analytic techniques

Multiple analytic techniques were used to interrogate the datasets. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and discursive analyses (Willig, 2001) were undertaken with the transcripts of discussions and interviews. We developed our own analytic techniques to examine the multimodal data, based on previous work examining the complexity of web pages, websites, web users and web genres and simultaneous interactions across sites (Baldry & Thibault, 2006; Kress, 2010; Norris, 2004). We engaged in regular team discussions (face-to-face and online using Scopia software) with named team members, PhD students, and other postgraduate students involved. This was essential in building team cohesion as we employed diverse analytic perspectives from a range of disciplinary backgrounds (e.g. psychology, media studies, cultural studies, public health, criminology and Māori and Pasifika research) and also ensured that our interpretations were culturally appropriate for all three ethnicity groups.

The doctoral students carried out multiple analyses of data with different broad areas of focus. These have been published as separate research papers in collaboration with their supervisors, and bound into theses with contextual and linking materials. Senior investigators have also collaborated in various ways to conduct multiple analyses around issues of importance and salience to the project objectives. Some of these have been published and some are currently in process. A list of all current outputs is provided in the Appendix.

## FINDINGS

Below we outline the results of the in-depth analyses in terms of each of our specified research objectives.

### 1) To identify how social network technologies are implicated in young people's drinking cultures.

All analyses demonstrated that social network technologies were fully integrated into young people's drinking cultures. Facebook was by far the most widely used social networking site, and all participants were members of Facebook. It played an important role for the majority of the participants before drinking (organising events, posting updates), during drinking (updates, photo sharing, meeting and socialising, interacting online), and following drinking episodes (uploading photos, tagging and untagging photos, commenting on photos). Facebook offered participants a new user-driven way to share drinking experiences and enact their drinking cultures, both via text and visually.

Facebook was routinely embedded in people's everyday lives. The technological affordances of Facebook offered many opportunities to extend and enhance the pleasures of heavy social drinking especially through the pervasive activity of uploading photos of drinking episodes, to be shared and commented on across friendship networks. Individual interviews demonstrated that photos posted on Facebook of nights out drinking were highly valued and essential to drinking cultures. Here even 'negative' events (e.g. violence, vomiting or accidents due to intoxication) were able to be reframed in 'positive' ways and shared using humour and a general interpretative frame that constructed such harms as participants having fun with friends. However, as we discuss below, this feature was nuanced by ethnicity, gender and class.

Facebook was also widely used to receive information (via news feeds on smartphones) about real-time alcohol (and other) promotions at stores, bars and clubs (as discussed more fully below). In this way Facebook was able to make drinking cultures far more 'visible', enabling young people to embed stories and photos about drinking in their everyday lives which they shared with 'friends'. This encouraged an online culture of heavy drinking, normalising it and making it routine and mundane, which is exactly how the participants in stages one and two described these alcohol-related practices. Stage 3 highlighted that Facebook content was saturated with commercial alcohol marketing material. In this way mundane Facebook use could potentially alter people's perceptions of what it is to be a young adult in contemporary Aotearoa/NZ, with intoxicogenic socialising and heavy drinking represented as normal and inextricably linked.

### 2) To explore how versions of identity are being created, negotiated, and performed through drinking practices, for example via the circulation of drinking stories and public displays on social networking sites

The young adults in this research created and recreated their identities via their drinking practices and their subsequent online displays, integrating online alcohol content into their everyday practices of constructing their identities. The continual circulation of drinking stories online, as well as the uploading of photos and associated practices of ongoing tagging and commenting, highlighted the ways in which drinking practices represented on Facebook contributed to the creation and display of edited versions of the self. Most of the participants described spending a large amount



of time and effort in tagging and untagging themselves in uploaded photos (their own, as well as other people's) to present a particular version of the self that they are happy with being publicly displayed. There were tensions involved here as well, especially when 'friends' posted unflattering or inappropriate photos of them. Participants spent much time online ensuring their 'drinking' identity was 'just right'; that is, displaying drinking and having fun, but not appearing 'too' drunk or looking unattractive. These rules, however, varied by social groups as for some young adults (particularly tertiary students), the 'too drunk' photos provided participants with cultural capital, contributing to humour and shared fun within their group of friends. Additionally, for some (particularly female) Māori and Pasifika participants, any photos which included them with an alcoholic drink were off-limits for Facebook posting due to the negative judgments that could potentially be made. Thus the ways in which participants negotiated public displays of drinking varied by social group, and were intimately linked to careful identity constructions.

### **3) To gain insight into the role SNS and digital imaging play in drinking cultures and identify the ways in which images relating to drinking stories are produced and displayed for others to view.**

The research found that photos on Facebook were crucial within young people's drinking cultures and the ongoing presentation of (and online social interaction about) their drinking stories. The importance of photos cannot be underestimated for these young people, with perhaps the exception of the young adults from lower socioeconomic groups who were not so invested in their online identity, perhaps because of limited internet access and not having the portable new media devices that many of the other participants used (e.g. smartphones). There was clear gendered dimension to taking photos within friendship groups when engaging in socialising and drinking, with this being seen as a female activity. However, while male participants did not take or upload photos to Facebook very frequently (in relative terms), they did describe investing time and energy to tagging and untagging photos of themselves (posted by others) following a night out, and paying meticulous attention to their appearance within these photos and in the online environment. Additionally, photos were always about drinking in a social environment – posting photos of oneself or anybody else drinking alone was strongly sanctioned and raised the possibility of drinking 'problems'. Thus particular kinds of images, photos and stories were created, uploaded and shared with friends online, leading to ongoing interactions and comments for days, weeks and even months following a drinking episode.

Furthermore, the individual interviews demonstrated strongly that the meanings of these photos could not necessarily be read off the photos themselves. Instead, participants were able to speak at great length about what each image meant, and why it was on their photo page, including photos in which they were absent (e.g. just out of the screen shot), and images that reminded them of a negative experience but did not depict it (e.g. just before falling down the stairs or getting in a fight). Thus the images were almost always positive, even when they actually referenced negative experiences, and the covert meanings were only available for friends who were 'in the know' by being there at the time. In this way photos on Facebook functioned to create in-groups with shared meanings about the photos, and this distinguished these groups from broader audiences including parents and other relatives. They also functioned to effectively 'airbrush' the drinking culture such that from the outside it appeared to be

all about fun, pleasure and positive experiences with friends (Niland, Lyons, Goodwin & Hutton, 2014).

### **4. Develop understandings of the ways in which identity negotiations and performances vary across ethnicity, gender, and social class.**

The data from stages one and two are unique as they are derived from three different ethnicity groups, as well as male, female and Fa'afafine participants from a range of socio-economic groups. Drinking practices, social networking, identity negotiations and performances were in some ways incredibly consistent across this diverse sample (e.g. in terms of frequency of drinking), but also starkly contrasting in other ways.

Consuming alcohol to a point of intoxication was a commonplace leisure-time activity for most of the young people in the sample. This was apparent across ethnicity groups, and there were similarities in terms of the importance of alcohol to social lives. However despite similarities in frequencies, amounts and experiences of drinking alcohol in our data, there were also clear cultural differences in drinking practices. Pasifika participants gave a strong sense of drinking being highly valued within the peer-group but more widely understood as transgressive of their cultural norms. While drinking at clubs/bars, local pubs and domestic settings was commonplace and frequent for some Pasifika participants, there were a number who did not drink and many who hid their consumption from family and church in particular. Māori participants clearly valued peer-group drinking at commercial and private venues, but there were more accounts of drinking with intergenerational family groups. They also gave numerous accounts of taking actions (e.g. within SNS), to avoid publicising drinking to family, work and community connections. Among Pākehā participants there was a pervasive trope of drinking as a routine, necessary and valued activity within peer social events in all the venues referred to above. Little sense of sanction was attached to this status quo and the hegemonic understanding was that they were established drinkers in a Pākehā regime that was a central and valued part of adult life and identity in Aotearoa/NZ. In this way identity negotiations around drinking and social networking involved more reflexive self-surveillance by young Māori and Pasifika adults, although class was relevant here and middle class Pākehā participants were also reflexive about their online posting.

In terms of gender, this research demonstrates that young women are under surveillance and subjected to normative expectations in different ways when drinking alcohol compared to their male counterparts. The young men were much more likely to describe the high consuming, extroverted, social assertiveness practice of hegemonic masculine drinking, while young women described needing to show moderated intake, controlled self-determination and social availability. These gendered features were most widely apparent in the talk of our Pākehā participants; as a result of social marginalisation, Māori and Pasifika women were already more aware of the surveillance of their lives and drinking practices and consequently of the requirement to display self-control around alcohol. This is a strong example of how ethnicity and gender interacted to affect identity negotiations and practices.

Social class and employment status were also central to the ways in which participants engaged in drinking practices and subsequently shared these online. Participants from upper socio-economic groups appeared to feel exempt from some

of the concerns that others expressed about their drinking and postings about drinking. Participants from middle socio-economic groups engaged in similar drinking practices, and sometimes considered Facebook material in terms of employment or future employers, whereas those from lower socio-economic groups frequently did not have the same choices in their lives and demonstrated the least engagement with 'managing' an appropriate online identity. Some working class participants expressed a resistance to such normative self-monitoring instead adopting a defiant 'in your face' determination to engage in intoxication and identity displays with little regard for consequences. Others, particularly those on government benefits, ensured they did not display their drinking practices online due to potential governmental surveillance of their leisure-time activities.



**5) Gain insight into the extent of young adults' use of new technologies to produce their own version of 'everyday celebrity' and how this relates to their drinking practices and cultures.**

Popular culture is saturated with hedonistic displays of drunken excess especially within online entertainment news, regular news, tabloid newspapers and magazines. This celebrity focus was significant in young adults' everyday lives for their identities and negotiated processes of producing social distinction. In this research we found that celebrity culture provided a field of resources through which young people explore and adopt values, tastes, and desirable and undesirable identities within the culture of intoxication, although not in straightforward ways. Drinking heavily was seen as a reasonable practice for some female celebrities (notably those who were young adults), while it was seen as natural and expected in most male celebrities. Many of our participants used social media to 'follow' and connect to celebrities in a way that assisted in crafting their online identity (particularly Māori and Pasifika participants) and served to demonstrate what it is to be a young adult in contemporary society. Such interests and actions allowed and reinforced the (social) importance for young people of engaging in their own everyday practices of 'celebritising' themselves, practices that were primarily achieved through social networking.

**6) Develop new theoretical understandings of the processes of identity construction and negotiation through drinking cultures and new media technologies.**

From the outset the research took an innovative stance on young people's alcohol consumption by moving away from a focus on drinking behaviours (e.g. unit based assessments of young people's drinking) towards a focus on their local drinking cultures. Some previous theorizing has challenged the construction of young people's drinking as an individualized process (e.g. Griffin et al., 2009; Lyons & Willott, 2008). Young people's drinking cultures are seen as embedded in a wider societal context, the intoxicogenic environment, which is saturated with alcohol marketing and the tensions inherent in neo-liberalism: urging people on the one hand to consume and to celebrate, while on the other demanding they be responsible and controlled. Our theorising has focused on these tensions and how they differentially affect young people's local drinking cultures in relation to ethnicity, gender and class. This research demonstrates the importance of cultural specificities of local drinking contexts within Aotearoa/NZ, and these in turn can be set within the context of the globalizing of youth consumption practices (Babor et al, 2010, Gordon, Heim & MacAskill, 2012).

As noted previously, the commercial nature of new media technologies play a central role in young adults' drinking cultures. A key finding from the research is new insight into the ways in which alcohol companies are using social media to market their products to young people, and how young adults are engaging with this marketing. Our findings showed that participants did not view Facebook as a commercial platform despite the fact that its business model relies on analysis of 'big data' from users, employing sophisticated algorithms to produce consumer information for sale to third parties. Facebook appeared to be considered independent even of the Internet, with some participants commenting that they don't go online but do go on Facebook.

Multi-national alcohol corporations have been well ahead of the curve in employing social media, particularly Facebook and other SNS for marketing purposes. Participants' Facebook profiles and activities demonstrated clearly that alcohol marketing initiatives within the online environment are effective. Elements of campaigns are actively appropriated by young people and employed within their profiles, to present tastes and preferences, facilitate social interaction, construct identities, and more generally develop cultural capital. The combination of online alcohol marketing with user-generated content and activity means that engagement with SNS reinforces the idea that drinking is about fun, pleasure and socializing. Alcohol brands become an integral part of young people's everyday lifestyles, reinforcing the widespread culture of intoxication.

Some participants expressed the view that only 'sidebar' advertisements on Facebook were marketing, and alcohol product pages (such as Tui, 42 Below Vodka, or Jim Beam) and their promotions (such as specials, competitions and giveaways), while commercial in origin, were not considered as explicit *marketing* as they were shared through postings to friend networks. While the participants in the research were reasonably well educated and saw themselves as media savvy, many did not see themselves as direct targets of online alcohol marketing (despite engaging with alcohol brand sites and friending them on Facebook). This is understandable as such commercial content and activity mimics friend relationships on Facebook, appearing in

participants' group links, Newsfeeds and status updates in the same manner that friends' postings do. It also is shared through friend networks, and therefore it becomes very difficult to distinguish what is marketing and what is not.

Alcohol companies recognise this and increasingly employ social media (and devote increasingly large percentages of their budgets) for digital marketing to young people. Participants also showed very little awareness of the amount of personal information they gave away with every 'like' or interaction with an alcohol page on Facebook. These personal data are used by drinks companies to engage in more sophisticated and personally targeted campaigns that appear to turn on a diverse range of what we have come to think of as 'marketing moments'. Our individual interviews demonstrated multiple examples of points at which the participant actively recognises a product or offer and expresses an intention to purchase. Furthermore, the geo-location technology embedded in smartphones allows marketers to tailor their messaging according to the users' proximity to their products. Participants, while recognising such content as commercial in origin, again did not see this as an explicit 'marketing' process, but rather as an extremely useful service they received while out drinking within an urban setting (especially when notifications were from bars or clubs giving 'information' about free entry or cheap drinks).

These kinds of marketing approaches were not unique to Facebook. Our stage 3 data highlighted how websites and phone apps promote drinking as well as reinforcing and normalising a culture of intoxication. For example, Drinkify is a website which matches a person's musical tastes to particular drinks. A smartphone cover has been designed to double as a bottle opener, which also has a free app that counts the number of bottles opened using the opener and allows the user to post this information as updates to their Facebook account. Other phone apps allow users to check the price and alcohol content of drinks on offer, and then select the drink that will get them drunkest for the least amount of money in the quickest time. All of this new media material contributes to a culture that reinforces alcohol consumption, and particularly excessive consumption, among young adults, not just in terms of their behaviours and drinking practices, but also within their everyday processes of identity negotiations and constructions.



## 7) Extend current theoretical frameworks on subjectivity and self-creation and their centrality to the dominant neoliberal culture where fame and attention are significantly valued.

The research demonstrates how crucially important being visible online was for our participants, whatever form this took. There are parallels in this respect between the creation of online branded selves and the broader endorsement of a culture of celebrity that permeates contemporary media and society. Most of the participants spent large amounts of time and effort engaging in Facebook activities, having it on at least in the background 24 hours a day, receiving notifications whenever they were mentioned or tagged in a photo, repeatedly posting personal photos, commenting regularly and posting status updates. In this way they spent very large amounts of time crafting their online identities and publicly displaying their social activities, drinking practices, and social connections. In contemporary youth culture, it seems that one of the greatest risks is to become 'invisible', that is, to sink below a valued level of popularity or micro-celebrity or worst, not be seen at all. Visibility online is therefore highly valued for the capital it builds, yet it simultaneously exposes young people to surveillance, moral judgment and commercial marketing by unseen audiences.

Displaying drinking practices within a culture of intoxication was also an important feature of identity creation (and negotiation) on Facebook for the young adult participants. This also made drinking cultures far more 'visible', but in celebrating their drinking practices online young people also exposed their activities to broader audiences. Participants' ethnicity structured the ways in which these issues played out, with Māori and Pasifika participants describing themselves as being much more wary of what is posted online and more aware of who may view it (e.g. whānau [family], employers, future employers, other people in society) than Pākehā participants. Differences across social class were also apparent here, with young people on government benefits being sensitive to potential surveillance, taking care not to post materials that could be interpreted as spending money on alcohol. Thus, online displays of excess functioned to provide pleasure and reinforce friendships and group bonds, but played out differently for participants depending upon their position within the social structure, thereby complicating the notion that SNS are an autonomous place of self-expression. Indeed, they seem to (re)introduce a range of different power dynamics that young people must continually and actively negotiate.

The insights and intricacies of identity negotiation and (re)creation within the current neoliberal climate are not straightforward and require different forms of work depending on people's position within society. Applied to drinking cultures these notions present multiple challenges to the pursuit of a "paradigm shift" around alcohol use in Aotearoa/NZ (New Zealand Law Commission, 2010) and minimizing alcohol-related harm for young people.



# CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research highlights that social networking systems and related technologies are being widely used by both young people and commercial interests within drinking practices and drinking cultures in Aotearoa/NZ. Venturing into these almost uncharted domains we have encountered a number of interrelated issues, including the ways in which 'neo-liberalism' impacts on people's everyday lives, how it is negotiated, reproduced and transformed; the ways in which new media technologies are embedded in the routines of young people's lives; how these technologies enable individuals to 'celebritise the self' by disseminating information on the Internet about their experiences, often about their drinking practices; and finally, the leading (but often hidden or disguised) role that commercial vested interest plays in all these areas. The research has explored young adults' negotiation of identities within these contexts, and within neoliberal discourses of individualism, consumerism and celebrity in contemporary society.

The increasingly close ties between SNS, consumption, and identity have become a key analytical focus for our project. Young people appear particularly attuned to the opportunities social networks sites offer for publicising their tastes and interests through engagement with heavily branded forms of consumption and marketing online. This clearly enables them to 'narrate' their own sense of identity, and branded consumption also obviously facilitates various forms of social interaction they value highly. There are also clear links here to the broader 'culture of celebrity' that dominates society more generally and which deserves much closer scrutiny. Commercialised life online also raises a number of critical issues around the increasingly dominant role of private corporations in social life, particularly when it is related to alcohol consumption. We are interested in pursuing these aspects of our project much further.

A key direction for future research will be exploring the beginnings made here and in the international research setting around alcohol marketing in SNS and related new media. The research literature is clear on the causal links between marketing and consumption with young people in particular (Anderson, de Bruijn, Angus, Gordon, & Hastings et al., 2009; Babor et al., 2010). Our study demonstrates how Facebook offers multiple 'marketing moments' to our participants, specific examples of which are recorded in our databases. However this is very early days in terms of understanding such potential new threats to public health. Future research could beneficially interrogate all aspects of presence and prevalence of online marketing of alcohol, and adopt multiple lines of inquiry with a particular emphasis on informing policy responses for prevention/mitigation and harm reduction approaches, particularly those pitched in the new media environment.

It is clear from the research that aside from concerns over alcohol and health, SNS are a highly significant development within specific cultural groupings with major influences on identity, relationships, culture and practices. For Māori and Pasifika in particular, the opportunities and threats are particularly acute and can assist in explaining tensions between generations over cultural issues and practices. There is a major role for research in contributing to media strategies for knowledge transmission and translation for diasporic communities, enhancing cultural identities and debating development and advancement in language, arts, sciences, economics and self-determination. Future research in this area also needs to focus on securing protections against the threats of commercialisation and developing programmes and practices to optimise the potentials of new media.

The findings from this research also demonstrate clear gendered issues relating to drinking practices, drinking cultures, use of SNS, Facebook work, identity negotiation processes, and the celebritisation of the self. There are a number of avenues these issues raise for future research, some of which will be followed through using the present dataset and subsequent publications. Specifically these include 1) the gendered nature of 'photo-work' with females almost exclusively having the role of photographer (despite traditional links between technology and masculinity), 2) the role of emotions in drinking and how these are significant in young women's drinking cultures, 3) 'extreme drinking' and gendered discourses such as 'tragic girls' which are apparent online, 4) the role Facebook plays in young people's perceptions of gendered drinking practices cultures through online posting of photos and discussions of drinking events. Beyond this, the research suggests that discourses of celebrity are used in gendered and classed ways by young adults to produce processes of social distinction and identity construction, and this would be a valuable avenue for future research to pursue.

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# APPENDIX: RESEARCH OUTPUTS

This research is continuing to generate a range of outputs, some led by the PhD students, some by Masters students, and some by the named investigators. These include outputs on the nature and use of social networking technologies, the drinking culture within Aotearoa/NZ, drinking practices, marketing, and also the intersection of many of these areas. Below we provide a list of publications, including peer-reviewed journal articles and theses. Members of the team have also given presentations about this research at local and international conferences. For a full list of presentations, and links to publications, please see our website: [www.drinkingcultures.info](http://www.drinkingcultures.info).

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## Forthcoming

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Lyons, A.C., Goodwin, I., McCreanor, T. & Griffin, C. Social networking and young adults' drinking practices: Innovative qualitative methods for health behavior research. Submitted manuscript.

Lyons, A.C., Griffin, C., Goodwin, I., Pedersen, M., McCreanor, T. & Moewaka Barnes, H. "Who knows if that's the alcohol or the heels?" Celebrity culture and the culture of intoxication. In progress.

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# Flaunting it on Facebook: Young adults, drinking cultures and the cult of celebrity

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2014-03

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10179/5187>

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